

Death by Suburb sermon series
8 – Imperfection: The Curse of the Unmowed Lawn
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“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Oh good, I thought this “being a Christian” thing was going to be hard. If that’s all it takes, I’ve got it made.

Why in the world would Jesus say this? He’s preaching to a crowd of people that included his disciples, whom he knew very well were anything but perfect. He’d already seen first-hand the fallibility of the human condition. Telling this crowd to be perfect is like putting a plate of Krispy Kremes in front of me and saying, “Don’t touch that!”

To understand what Jesus is getting at here I think we need to step back and look at what he means by perfect, because I believe his definition and the world’s definition are two very different things. In fact, being perfect in Christ’s eyes may be directly antithetical to the world’s call to perfection.

We finish our “Death by Suburb” sermon series today, and I hope God has spoken to you at some point through it. I know God has held a mirror up to my life through these sermons. After one of them, a congregation member going through the line after church looked at me and simply said, “Ouch.” I would echo that sentiment. Whenever God shines a light into the dark places in our lives, we often respond with an “ouch.”

That really gets at the heart of today’s sermon, as well, because I think so few of us are willing to say “ouch” in our lives, at least out loud. What I mean by that is that there is something at work in our suburban culture and our lives that tells us it’s bad to let on that you are hurt or vulnerable or less than perfect.

Here’s an example. Our house sits on a corner lot, and I’ve found that we tend to get a lot of dandelions in our yard, many more than the neighbor’s. It’s like we run dandelion interference for the rest of the neighborhood. And I noticed that a neighbor across the street who also has a corner lot never has as many dandelions as us. I saw him outside one time and was tempted to go over and ask him what he does to his yard to keep the weeds out, but I didn’t, because doing so would reveal that I didn’t know how to take care of it myself. And I didn’t want him or anyone else in my neighborhood to know that I didn’t know something, even though they could figure that out just by looking at all the dandelions in my yard.

Now, I know I don’t know everything. And I’m sure my neighbor knows I don’t know everything. And I know that you all know I don’t know everything. Even my kids are finding that out. But there’s something in us that is hesitant to admit the undeniable fact that we are all human. So we mow our lawns and wash our cars and put on nice clothes to cover up the hurt and the pain of what’s on the inside.

This becomes especially true when our humanity shows through in less acceptable ways. I talked a few weeks ago about image management, how we suburbanites work hard to maintain a certain image, and will go out of our way to keep up that appearance. We hate the idea of dandelions in our lawn and what it says about us, so we water it and fertilize it and manicure it and spray chemicals on it to keep up its appearance. And we do the same thing with our lives; we hide what hurts or what we consider socially unacceptable in order to keep up the exterior we present to others.

Therefore, perfection, as defined by the world, means a life where nothing is broken, out of place, or damaged. The marriage is fine, the kids are fine, the finances are fine, our health is fine. Eric Sandras says, "Life in suburbia encourages us to hide the ugly or uncomfortable or painful parts of our lives from others and from God. After all, no one else seems broken."

Sandras says this destructive mindset carries over into our faith. We don't want anyone to think that we aren't secure in what we believe, so we pretend to have a great relationship with Christ, even when we are wracked with doubt or discouragement. Sandras says, "It is easy for us to drift toward simply acting as if we are intimate with Christ, when the truth is that we are simply functioning out of a sense of duty, just as we might with a business partner." It's Cotton Candy spirituality, taking a little substance and puffing it up in order to make it look like there's more there to impress others.

This whole demand on our lives that we be perfect is enough to drive you crazy. We easily fall into the trap of envy, like I did with my neighbor's dandelion-free lawn. Now, I don't know this guy; he might secretly chew with his mouth open or forward chain letter emails. I'm sure if I went digging through his garbage I'd find at least one or two recyclables that he threw away. But all I saw, when looking at his lawn, was the stark reminder that I'm not perfect enough. Winston Churchill said, "They say nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they would make up their minds."

I think we need to redefine perfection. I think we need to get off the hamster wheel that is the suburban pursuit of the perfect life, to admit that we have places in our lives that are broken. Our culture finds no value in broken things, but God finds redemptive value in them. Maybe we're pursuing the wrong kind of perfection.

In our passage today, Jesus talks about loving your enemies and extending compassion to those whom the world has forgotten. And then he says, "Be perfect." The irony, of course, is that by ourselves, we can't. We don't have the power to achieve perfection alone. We absolutely need God's help.

I think that's exactly what Jesus is saying here. "Be perfect" means being willing to invite others – including God – into our lives, past the shiny façade and into the dusty crawlspaces. What we'll likely find is that not only does everyone have baggage, but some of it may even match ours. Like I said a few weeks ago, C.S. Lewis says the mark of true friendship is when one person says to another, "What? You, too? I thought I was the only one." Being perfect means opening yourself up to relationships with others at a deep, human level, and being willing to discuss doubt, discouragement, and dandelions.

Not only will we grow in our relationships with each other, but also in our relationship with God. The pursuit of perfection in this world contaminates our spirituality, because we seem to believe we have to achieve certain prerequisites – be clean enough or respectable enough or religious enough – before we can come to God. Some people believe it is possible to sin too much, wander too far, and blow it too big to come to God, that our lives have to be dust bunny-free before we can invite God over.

But I believe the opposite is true. God loves us not in spite of who we are, but because of it. Jesus, God's only son, wasn't born in a hospital or a palace, but in the brokenness of poverty, in a manger. God is drawn to people who invite him into their brokenness.

Here's the truth, as I see it and experience it. Perfect lawns don't mean perfect people. Clean houses don't mean clean lives. Big homes don't mean close family relationships, it only creates more room for family members to hide from each other. Fish stickers and Christian bumper stickers don't mean a faithful, Christ-like life. But somehow perpetuating the image of authenticity has become more important than being authentic. So we busy ourselves pursuing perfection on the outside so as not to have to face what's inside, the damaged relationships or failing health or nagging doubts.

But God loves you because of those things. God created you, so he knows you better than anyone else, even better than yourself. He's knows where your dandelions are. And what I believe God wants is for us to drop any pretense that we're anything other than who we are, and then to simply ask, "God, make me perfect."

What does that mean for us? We may think it means removing the dandelions, but it doesn't. We pray for God to take away the things that keep us from being perfect, and instead God gives us the strength to endure those things, or the grace to live with them. I pray for God to take away my controlling nature, and instead God gives me the humility to ask for forgiveness when I step on someone's toes. I pray for God to take away the dandelions, and instead God gives me a new appreciation for having a lawn to call my own.

As I understand Jesus, in his teachings and his life, being perfect simply means being faithful. Sometimes that means living against the grain of our suburban culture, which has a numbing effect on our spirituality. It takes work not to lose your soul amidst the traps of suburbia. But with Christ's help, we can strive each day to be a little more faithful than we were yesterday, loving each other and caring for each other and serving each other because of who we were created to be. Perfection is not a destination; it is in the journey itself. If we are faithful in our love and service, then we can trust that God will make us perfect.